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Findings from the first round of qualitative data collection for the RPM project in Somalia

November 2022

ABOUT THE RESILIENCE POPULATION-LEVEL MEASUREMENT ACTIVITY (RPM)

The Somalia Resilience Population-Level Measurement Activity (RPM) is a Mercy Corps and ACDI/VOCA-implemented five year, USAID-funded \$9 million USD program designed to collaboratively explore and test solutions for user-centered resilience measurement in USAID’s focal zone. The program will use population-level resilience measurement and a participatory approach to facilitate the use of resilience-oriented results frameworks as a common entry point to unpack resilience learning questions. RPM will help aid stakeholders better align their interventions in a shared resilience vision, strengthening the foundations for collective impact in Somalia’s recurrent and protracted crisis context.

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Disclaimer

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Front Cover Photo Credit

Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps, 2022.

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ACRONYMS

ACDI/VOCA	Agricultural Cooperative Development International/ Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance
CAHW	Community-based Animal Health Worker
CDCS	Country Development Cooperation Strategy
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
IDI	In-Depth Interview
IDP	Internally Displaced Person
IPC	Integrated Phase Classification
KII	Key Informant Interview
MHPSS	Mental Health and Psychosocial Support
PD	Positive Deviant
PSS	Psychosocial Support
RMS	Recurrent Monitoring Survey
RPM	Somalia Resilience Population Measurement
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
USD	United States Dollar
VSLA	Village Savings and Loan Association

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Current projections suggest that as many as 6.7 million people across Somalia will face Crisis (Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) Phase 3) or worse food insecurity outcomes during the last quarter of 2022.¹ As the likelihood of famine is rapidly becoming a reality, the Somalia Resilience Population Measurement (RPM) Activity has conducted qualitative and quantitative data collection in response to the ongoing drought to better understand if and how households are coping during the crisis. A five-year USAID-funded project implemented by Mercy Corps in coordination with Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA), RPM seeks to improve upon current approaches to resilience measurement in order to inform program adaptation and decision-making among implementers, donors, and government representatives. RPM research activities consist of two intertwined components: 1) a panel survey that will trace a diverse set of livelihood groups over five years, and 2) a recurrent monitoring survey, with alternative periods of qualitative and quantitative data collection. Through the RPM activities, Mercy Corps and its partners will explore the extent to which resilience capacities and wellbeing outcomes change over time and probe how resilience stakeholders in the USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) Focal Zone (comprised of Banadir and most of the Southwest State) may or may not be contributing to this change.

RPM began in 2021 with a formative phase of research, and this formative round of the recurring monitoring survey (RMS) aimed to answer three overarching questions:

¹ FEWS NET (2022).

1. What does effective coping mean in the context of the 2021-2022 drought?
2. How are households relying on social networks to cope with the current drought?
3. What are some of the main psychosocial determinants of household resilience against shocks?

Key Findings & Recommendations

What does effective coping mean in the context of the 2021-2022 drought?

- Looking to positive deviant households,² the research found that while they were equally impacted by the severity of the drought, their effective use of coping and resilience strategies allowed them to withstand its ramifications for much longer. As the drought has gone on, they continue to fare better than the average household in their community due to a number of factors, including access to loans and credit and the diversification of their income sources.
- Two factors were decisive when it came accessing credit: 1) individuals that were well-known or well-established in their community were more likely to receive credit versus those that were not, and; 2) households that were selected to receive external assistance, which they often used to repay debts, found it easier to access credit from local business owners.
- Many households that received external assistance reported using it to repay their debts in a timely fashion, which helped to establish their creditworthiness among local businesses and shop owners and ensure future access to credit.
- For those who primarily engaged in agro-pastoral livelihoods, having multiple sources of income helped households meet some needs and access some basic necessities. These individuals often engaged in casual labor activities—such as collecting and selling firewood and selling easy to harvest leafy vegetables. Those that engaged in more skilled labor activities, such as teaching, tailoring, and construction, fared even better when it came to coping. These livelihood activities were less vulnerable to climate shocks, were in higher demand, and provided higher wages.
- Based on previous experiences with the 2011/12 famine and 2016/17 drought, some households made the choice to diversify their livelihood activities, establishing small businesses because they had fared better during previous crises. Moreover, participation in savings groups and VSLA programs helped them develop small nest eggs that later became crucial to supporting their households and livelihood activities during the drought.
- **Recommendations:**
 - **Invest in vocational training, VSLAs and savings groups, and other long-term resilience-focused activities.** Resilience activities must support households' capacity to diversify their livelihoods in the face of emergent shocks and protracted crises. One of the most critical capacities to emerge during the study was the capacity to diversify livelihoods, particularly among those for whom agro-pastoral activities were their primary source of income. Among households that reported faring better during the drought, access to vocational training and VSLAs and/or savings groups had a decisive impact on their livelihoods and resilience.
 - **Monitor household debt cycles and patterns to ensure the effectiveness of cash and cash plus activities, and to take advantage of opportunities to bolster local markets.** Access to credit has been critical to households' capacity to survive and access basic resources during the drought, with external assistance often used to not only repay debts in a timely manner but establish creditworthiness among local businesses. Monitoring household debt cycles and repayment patterns alongside routine market monitoring, including among local traders and vendors, may also enable aid actors to identify opportunities to further reinforce local markets through intentional assistance to small businesses. As a result, aid actors may be better able to time activities

² Positive deviance is the "behavioral and social change approach which is premised on the observation that in any context, certain individuals confronting similar challenges, constraints, and resource deprivations to their peers, will nonetheless employ uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies which enable them to find better solutions." For more information on positive deviance see [BetterEvaluation](#).

and allocate assistance amounts (particularly cash assistance) to ensure they achieve programmatic outcomes.

How are households relying on social networks to cope with the current drought?

- Households provide one another a range of support, from the tangible to the intangible, including cash, food, information, and emotional support. The more connected a household was, the easier it was for them to access support from their community. Those with more social connections, particularly connections in urban areas and the diaspora, leveraged their networks to share and secure support for the more vulnerable and less-connected households in their communities.
- Given widespread high levels of need, these informal support networks and the (re)distribution of resources within them ensure that the most vulnerable—and often more socially isolated—households are able to survive the drought. However, these networks have become increasingly exhausted as the drought has continued and households' capacity to share has declined.
- **Recommendations:**
 - **Monitor and improve targeting approaches to help minimize social exclusion and mitigate increasing tensions.** Given the critical role that informal and local groups, including private sector actors and diaspora groups, have played in the humanitarian response, local and external actors must effectively partner and coordinate with one another to ensure that their efforts do not overlap and undermine one another. Aid actors can complement these efforts by working with community leaders to develop people-centered communication strategies that help with the dissemination of timely and accurate information among households, particularly during the early design and implementation phases of activities.
 - **Strengthen informal support networks by partnering and working with local community actors, who are deeply embedded in their communities and pre-positioned to reach vulnerable households.** Local leaders and community actors are a critical source of knowledge and access, often organizing and leveraging their own informal support networks to meet their communities needs, making them vital partners in aid actors' efforts. Aid actors can work with community partners to monitor the strength of informal support networks, remain vigilant for signs of exhaustion, and identify key program entry points.

What are some of the main psychosocial determinants of household resilience against shocks?

- Optimism, commitment to hard work (e.g. a sense of self-efficacy and future-oriented thinking), social connections, and seeking comfort in religion and spirituality were all highlighted as key psychosocial factors that contributed to individuals' resilience. Through these capacities, participants described developing a sense of purpose and engaging in meaning making during difficult circumstances, which helped reinforce the role of community and social connections as well as their internal locus of control.
- Community and religious leaders were a key source of emotional support for many. Their in-depth knowledge of their communities and capacity to mobilize resources and social support often meant that these leaders were decisive when it came to a households' ability to cope.
- **Recommendations:**
 - **Invest in and develop locally-relevant MHPSS interventions that are focused on reinforcing key sources of support within communities, such as local and religious leaders.** Given the acute nature of the current crisis, aid actors should identify and partner with key sources of psychosocial support within communities. This can include partnering with local and religious leaders and community health workers to invest and train them in evidence-based approaches such as, and work with them to adapt and refine such approaches to ensure that they are contextually relevant to the needs of communities.
 - **Design resilience activities to include components that bolster the psychosocial factors contributing to resilience, including informal support networks and social connectedness.** Activities that establish and support group-based forums, such as self-help groups or VSLAs, provide an entry point and opportunity for aid actors to maximize on the psychosocial benefits they provide.



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BACKGROUND

Climate change and conflict are colliding to produce perhaps unprecedented levels of hunger worldwide.³ More than six months of conflict in Ukraine—one of the biggest providers of the world’s wheat supply—have left approximately 60 countries struggling to afford food imports.⁴ One of them is Somalia. By August 2022, more than 90% of Somalia was experiencing severe to extreme drought conditions.⁵ In combination with inflation and road blockages by Al Shabab, food prices have skyrocketed as a result. Since July 2021, some regions of Somalia have seen the minimum food basket expenditure rise to over 160%, with the price of sorghum alone increasing to more than 240% the five year average.⁶ This rapid increase in the price of staple goods has been aggravated by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine—both of which were Somalia’s primary supplier of wheat.⁷ These economic shocks come after several years of widespread shocks, including climate change,⁸ COVID-19,⁹ and locust infestations.¹⁰ Current projections suggest that as many as 6.7 million people across Somalia will face Crisis (Integrated Phase Classification (IPC) IPC Phase 3) or worse food insecurity outcomes during the last quarter of 2022.¹¹ With aid actors stretched thin by multiple humanitarian crises, Under-Secretary-General for Humanitarian Affairs and Emergency Relief Coordinator Martin Griffiths urged donors to heed the signs of widespread food insecurity in Somalia, remarking that “famine is at the door, and today we are

3 Edwards (2022).

4 Wax (2022).

5 Severe to extreme drought conditions are marked by major crop and land pasture losses and/or widespread water shortages or restrictions (See Cornell 2018); Somalia Food Security Cluster Partners Meeting (2022).

6 Oxfam International (2022).

7 Raghavan (2022).

8 Brown, Farhan, & Hodder (2021).

9 Randa et al. (2020).

10 International Committee of the Red Cross (2020).

11 FEWS NET (2022).

receiving a final warning.”¹²

Resilience in Somalia

The resilience agenda quickly gained steam during the 2011-12 drought and famine in the Horn of Africa, as aid actors, donors, and agencies called for a shift in approach when working with crisis-affected communities. With aid actors looking to protect hard-won development gains, this new agenda pivoted “the conversation from a focus on vulnerabilities to one focused on strengthening sources of resilience - or the capacities of households, markets and institutions to mitigate shocks and secure well-being among crisis-affected groups.”¹³ Shock-prone Somalia, which has been navigating multiple complex crises for several decades, is one context where the sector’s resilience approach has taken root. Often navigating multiple shocks and stresses, households rely on a number of resilience capacities (used in

Resilience is frequently understood as an individual’s, a household’s, and/or a community’s capacity to not only maintain their wellbeing but to thrive in spite of widespread shocks and stresses, including conflict, drought, economic shocks, and global pandemics. Resilience is informed and strengthened by both objective and subjective factors. **Objective** factors include food security, livelihood strategies, and assets. **Subjective** factors include psychosocial factors such as aspiration and self-efficacy, social norms, and social cohesion. It is through a combination of these factors that individuals, households, and communities are better prepared to cope, adapt, and thrive in the face of new and protracted crises.

various combinations) to cope with the most predominant shocks in Somalia, including drought, conflict and insecurity, flooding, crop and livestock disease, and famine. The degree to which a resilience capacity is utilized to address the effects of different shocks varies.

To better understand the resilience capacities utilized by households in Somalia, the Somalia Resilience Population Measurement (RPM) study team conducted a literature review and identified six key capacities that emerged from the literature: social connectedness, informal social safety nets, access to services, livelihood adaptation, income diversification, and psychosocial factors.¹⁴ The combination and degree to which a household can cope using a particular capacity depends on a variety of factors, including ethnic and clan affiliations;¹⁵ displacement status;¹⁶ gender and age;¹⁷ access to remittances;¹⁸ and location.¹⁹ For example, households rely on their social connections during many types of shocks, turning to their connections during periods of resource scarcity due to crop infestations and market disruptions and price increases due to conflict. In contrast, access to services (particularly water and sanitation services, as well as veterinary services) can be crucial when households experienced water shortages, crop infestations, and livestock diseases. Ultimately, households are strategic in if, how, and when they rely on specific resilience capacities.

¹² UNOCHA (2022).

¹³ Petryniak, Proctor, & Kurtz (2020).

¹⁴ Elsamahi, Kim, & Scantlan (2022).

¹⁵ Majid & McDowell (2012); Maxwell et al. (2016).

¹⁶ Pape & Karamba (2019).

¹⁷ Ochiltree & Toma (2021).

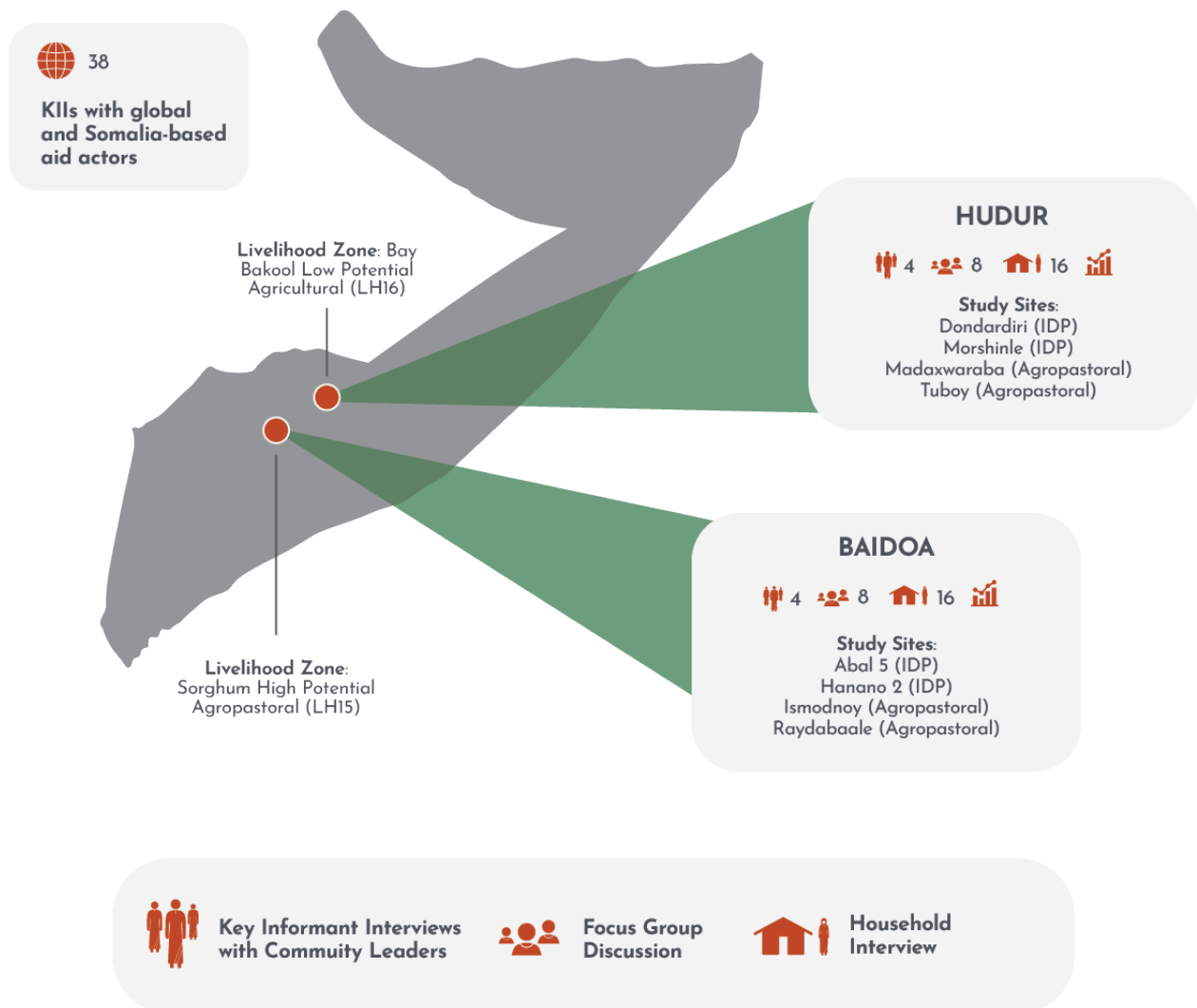
¹⁸ Majid & McDowell (2012); Maxwell et al. (2016); Lwanga-Ntale & Owino (2020).

¹⁹ Pape & Karamba (2019); Lwanga-Ntale & Owino (2020).

Project Background & Context

The RPM Activity is a five-year USAID-funded project implemented by Mercy Corps in coordination with Agricultural Cooperative Development International/Volunteers in Overseas Cooperative Assistance (ACDI/VOCA). It seeks to improve upon current approaches to resilience measurement in order to inform program adaptation and decision-making among implementers, donors, and government representatives. Ultimately, it aims to develop and lead a resilience measurement system on the collective resilience outcomes at a population level and build the capacity of participating stakeholders to estimate individual contributions to collective resilience outcomes in the USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategy (CDCS) Focal Zone, which includes Banadir, most of Southwest State, and extends to limited areas in Hirshabelle State and Jubaland State. Through the RPM activities, Mercy Corps and its partners will explore the extent to which resilience capacities and wellbeing outcomes change over time and probe how resilience stakeholders in the Focal Zone may or may not be contributing to this change.

Figure 1: Study sites



Research Questions

Based on a previous literature review regarding the resilience capacities most important in Somalia²⁰ and consultations within the RPM team, the study team identified three areas for further inquiry. First, the study team sought to examine the drought's impacts and the effectiveness of households' response strategies. Previous research has found that households are strategic when it comes to identifying and utilizing different coping strategies at different stages of a crisis. By understanding the coping strategies households' rely on throughout a crisis, aid actors may be more effective at identifying and sequencing their interventions depending on the coping strategies being utilized by households. Second, the study team looked to unpack the role of social connections among drought-affected communities. Research has shown that social connections and social networks play a critical role in household resilience, especially during crises.²¹ Somalia is no different, with social connections being a crucial source of survival and resilience during previous periods of drought and famine.²² Finally, the study team looked to this round of data collection to better understand the role of psychosocial wellbeing in household resilience and coping. Early evidence has stressed the important contribution of psychosocial factors, such as aspiration, self-efficacy, confidence to adapt, to household resilience.²³ Given the nascent yet promising nature of this area of research, this formative round of data collection provided an opportunity to better understand how psychosocial factors are helping households cope and adapt, as well as the crisis's impact on households' overall psychosocial wellbeing.

Table 1: Overview of Study Questions

RESEARCH THEMES	STUDY QUESTIONS
1) <i>Drought Impacts and Coping Strategies</i>	1) What does effective coping mean in the context of the 2021-2022 drought?
	2) How have coping strategies evolved during the different stages of the drought?
	3) In what ways are resilience-building interventions aiding shock-affected households in accessing critical coping strategies?
2) <i>Social Connectedness</i>	4) How are households relying on social networks to cope with the current drought?
	5) In what ways are locally led initiatives supporting shock-affected households?
	6) What are some of the main risks and opportunities for aid actors to build social connectedness during this crisis?
3) <i>Mental Health and Psychosocial Well-being</i>	7) What are some of the main psychosocial determinants of household resilience against shocks?
	8) In what ways is the current crisis affecting the mental health and psychosocial well-being of shock-affected households?
	9) What are some of the main barriers towards mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services in Somalia? In what ways can MHPSS activities be incorporated into resilience and drought-response activities?

²⁰ Elsamahi, Kim, & Scantlan (2022).

²¹ Kim et al. (2020); Kim et al. (2022); Greene et al. (2021).

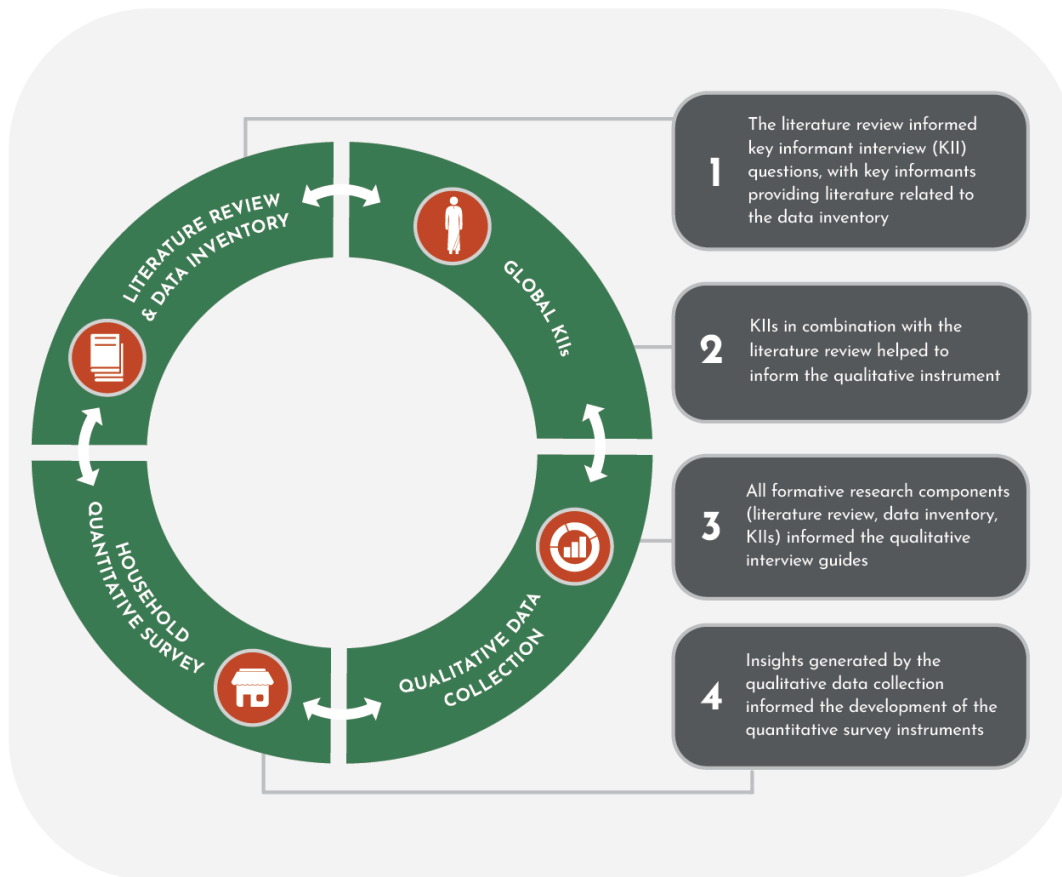
²² Maxwell et al. (2016).

²³ Jones & Tanne (2017); USAID (2018).

Methodology

RPM consists of two intertwined research components, a panel survey and a mixed-methods recurrent monitoring survey (RMS), which aim to inform the scope of future resilience-building activities in the region. The panel survey will trace a diverse set of livelihood groups over five years with a focus on understanding the types of resilience capacities that households employ to prepare for recurring shocks and stresses. The mixed-method RMS, with its alternating periods of qualitative and quantitative data collection, is delving into how certain livelihood groups employ these capacities as shocks occur. The qualitative data collection aims to illuminate positive deviant (PD)²⁴ strategies that are considered effective, while the quantitative phases are looking to determine the prevalence of this behavior within the chosen subpopulation. RPM began its formative research in late 2021, using the first round of RMS—both quantitative and qualitative approaches—to capture insights as humanitarian conditions continued to deteriorate. This report contains findings from the initial round of qualitative data collection, which consisted of key informant interviews (KIIs) with global and Somalia-based aid actors, KIIs with community leaders, focus group discussions (FGDs), and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with households.

Figure 2: Data sources



To inform the development of and provide a contextual basis for the interview guides, the project began its formative research activities between September and December 2021, which included: 1) a review of the literature on resilience in Somalia between 2010 and 2021; 2) key informant interviews with global and local aid actors, and; 3) a data inventory reviewing best practices for conducting quantitative data collection in Somalia and other similar contexts. Through the formative research process, the study team identified six emerging sets of capacities that contribute to household resilience in Somalia. These include social connectedness, informal safety nets, access to services, livelihood

²⁴ Positive deviance is the "behavioral and social change approach which is premised on the observation that in any context, certain individuals confronting similar challenges, constraints, and resource deprivations to their peers, will nonetheless employ uncommon but successful behaviors or strategies which enable them to find better solutions." For more information on positive deviance see [BetterEvaluation](#).

adaptation, livelihood diversification, and psychosocial well-being.²⁵

Building on these preliminary findings, the RPM project is conducting a longitudinal study to better understand how the livelihood groups most severely affected by the ongoing drought are relying on some of these capacities, and to explore what other capacities might be of relevance to the population at large. Based on consultations with project stakeholders, including RPM and USAID staff, key informant interviews with global and local aid actors and experts on the Somalia context, and a review of the resilience literature, the RPM team identified the three lines of inquiry described above. The study team looked to deepen understanding of the resilience capacities that Somali households have long relied upon, as well as understand the trajectory of coping strategies employed by households over the course of the crisis thus far.

Sampling Techniques

Given continuing insecurity, the safety of field research colleagues and access constraints were a key sampling consideration. Access to settlement sites was largely facilitated by peer agencies, including the Somalia Resilience Partnership (SRP) which is working in Baidoa and Hudur. Where the SRP was not present, the RPM staff consulted the Camp Coordination Camp Management (CCCM) tool for the IDP platform to gain access. The research team employed a purposive sampling approach in order to identify and select communities who could provide rich insights into the coping strategies used to cope with the drought. They were selected based on projections shared by FSNAU²⁶ of districts that faced crisis- or emergency-level food insecurity (IPC 5) in the CDCS focal zone, as well as recommendations made by local key informants to help reach beyond the SRP network.

A snowball sampling technique was employed to help identify PD households, who are often more difficult to confirm without referrals by community contacts. PD households were identified through KIIs with community leaders and FGD participants, who were asked to identify those they thought were coping with the drought impacts better than the average household in their community.

Study Sites

This round of qualitative data collection focused on agro-pastoralist groups in the Bay and Bakool areas, covering the Sorghum High Potential Agropastoral (LH15) and the Bay Bakool Low Potential Agricultural (LH16) livelihood zones, along with internally displaced households in these areas. Site selection was informed by FSNAU's latest IPC and Risk Famine Analysis, which lists agro-pastoral groups within these localities as one of the groups most severely affected by the drought.²⁷ Two districts were selected from these livelihood zones: Hudur and Baidoa. In both of these districts, four different sites were identified and selected for the data collection process, for a total of eight sites. In each district, two agropastoral villages and two IDP settlements were selected. Sites were selected based on whether or not they had received external assistance during the drought in the six months prior to the data collection, as well as the accessibility and safety of the locations.

Table 2: Overview of Study Sites

LIVELIHOOD ZONE	DISTRICT	STUDY SITES
Sorghum High Potential Agropastoral (LH15)	Baidoa	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Abal 5 (IDP) Hanano 2 (IDP) Ismodnoy (agro-pastoral) Raydabaale (agro-pastoral)

²⁵ For more in-depth exploration of these capacities and the formative research process, see Elsamahi, Kim, & Scantlan (2022).

²⁶ FEWS NET & FSNAU (2022).

²⁷ Ibid.

Bay Bakool Low Potential Agricultural (LH16)	Hudur	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dondardiri (IDP) • Morshinle (IDP) • Madaxwaraba (agro-pastoral) • Tuboy (agro-pastoral)
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Interview methods

Field researchers conducted three different types of interviews: KIIs with community leaders and global and local aid actors, FGDs divided by gender, and in-depth interviews with PD households.²⁸ KIIs with global and local aid actors helped illustrate the current aid landscape, as well as some of the opportunities and challenges when it came to operationalizing resilience in the humanitarian response. Through interviews with community leaders, the research team looked to identify the main challenges their communities were facing, as well as help identify PD households for in-depth interviews. FGDs illustrated the ways in which participants' communities were coping with challenges related to the drought. These discussions included 8 to 12 participants, representing different age groups within the community and across households. In-depth interviews with PD households were conducted to understand what strategies and resources they were utilizing that helped them fare better compared to others in their community. These participants also identified other households who they believed were coping well to be interviewed by the research team. In total, 92 interviews were conducted with aid actors, community leaders, households, and community members.

Table 3: Overview of interview types & number conducted

METHOD	TYPE OF INFORMANT	TOTAL # OF INTERVIEWS CONDUCTED	LOCATION
FGD	Community	16	Baidoa, Hudur
IDI	Households	29	Baidoa, Hudur
KII	Community leaders	9	Baidoa, Hudur
KII	Global and Somalia-based aid actors	38	Global
	SUB-TOTAL	92	

Training and data cleaning

The qualitative tools were translated to the Mahathir dialect and then rigorously reviewed by Somalia-based RPM team members. They were then further tested and refined during a two-day training with field researchers. Training was broken into two sessions, with the first focused on familiarizing the field researchers with the study tools, qualitative techniques, and best practices, including a focus on probing and effectively compiling interview notes. The second day of training was focused on the application of these techniques, allowing the researchers to gain familiarity with the tools and techniques they would be utilizing. Field researchers reviewed the study tools in both English and Somali and were briefed on the ethical considerations that come with qualitative data collection. Training materials and the sessions were developed and led by an experienced consultant with extensive experience in leading qualitative, quan-

²⁸ Key informant and individual household interviews took approximately 45 minutes to an hour. FGDs typically ran 90 minutes to two hours.

titative, and mixed methods studies in Somalia. Field researchers were selected based on their previous experience conducting qualitative data collection and their experience with facilitating discussions with vulnerable populations.

Ahead of data collection, the RPM study team worked with contacts in the study communities to notify and raise awareness among community members that a study was in progress. Given conflict-related insecurity and concerns regarding Al Shabab, the study team took these steps to generate buy-in among local leaders and alleviate any potential concerns among community members. Locally-based RPM research team members continuously monitored and assisted field researchers during the data collection process and conducted interviews with community leaders. After data collection was completed, field researchers transcribed and filed their field notes, which then went through a review and quality check process by RPM staff.

Analysis approach

After interview data was cleaned and translated, the research team identified several areas of interest based on the study's research questions and utilized a content analysis approach to review the data. In particular, the research team reviewed the interviews for narratives regarding the impact of the drought, food insecurity, coping strategies that were to be the most effective, sources of resilience, the impact of external assistance, any anticipatory activities conducted in the lead up to the drought, and psychosocial factors. The research team reviewed all the interview notes, extracting insights and identifying areas requiring further probing (see implications for further research section below). The study team then engaged in several analytical discussions with field researchers and coordinators to corroborate the insights distilled from the analysis process.

Study limitations

While rigorous protocols and methods were developed and applied to the data collection process, there remain several limitations. First, the qualitative insights gathered through field consultations should not be used to make generalizations beyond the context of the selected study sites. Rather, they should serve as illustrations demonstrating how certain capacities are used and provide more insight on the lived experiences of drought-affected households. Second, limited access as a result of insecurity made it increasingly difficult for the study team to interview households across a number of villages and districts. As a result, some of the findings presented here may not be representative of trends in other districts and regions across Somalia. Finally, there remains the issue of representation within our study sample. While the research team took a number of steps to ensure demographic diversity in our study population, the background of our participants has skewed "older" and more female. This is a result of the gender balance on our field research team which consisted of more women than men, and which—due to gender norms that can sometimes limit interaction across genders—may have limited our capacity to have more equitable representation. All of these limitations will be taken into consideration during future rounds of data collection, with the goal of improving the representativeness in our qualitative—and quantitative—samples.

Despite the robust evidence regarding the role of social networks in household resilience, several gaps in our understanding remain. Primarily, the role and extent to which external aid can play in supporting social networks remains unclear. At minimum, a do-no-harm approach is required to ensure that aid actors do not disrupt these critical sources of resilience. Further, while the evidence on social connections does cover a broad swath of groups, it does not fully capture the gender and age dimensions of social connections. Additional research is needed to understand how social connectedness and inclusion in social networks may differ among women and youth. Finally, a number of questions remain regarding the measurement of social connections. There is much work to be done to better understand, for example, how social networks can be assessed in a contextualized manner and monitored in a manner that effectively accounts for how metrics of social networks may shift in times of crises vs. periods of stability.

Ethics & data security

Given the involvement of human subjects, RPM research methods and procedures were reviewed by the Southwest State's Ministry of Planning in late November 2021. In line with the approved protocol, all interview participants—including global and local key informants—were briefed of their rights as participants and informed consent was

requested from all. All responses have been anonymized and are stored in a repository that is only accessible by the RPM research team. Where necessary, the names of participants have been changed to protect their identities.

To protect the emotional well-being of participants and recognizing it may not always be contextually-appropriate to discuss, interviewers did not ask questions related to mental health or psychosocial well-being during individual household interviews. Instead, insights were generated through KIs with local and global aid actors and community leaders from each study site.²⁹ Through these conversations, the research team was able to inquire about the main factors that contribute to psychosocial wellbeing and trends in mental health outcomes, both across Somalia and in the respective study sites.

Finally, while the timing of the study has generated a rich collection of insights into households' resilience strategies and the trajectory of their wellbeing, the research team recognizes the undue burden that may occur as a result of taking part in this study during rapidly changing and precarious conditions. Great care was taken by the research team, particularly field researchers who conducted the interviews, to minimize the research burden on participants whenever possible. This included reminding participants of their right to skip or refuse to answer any of our questions, limiting household interviews to 45 minutes or less, and requesting feedback from participants at the end of interviews. However, there remains ample opportunity to continue refining our methods and training the research team in approaches that further minimize the research burden and encourage the psychological safety of our participants. This continues to be a key priority as humanitarian conditions are likely to deteriorate over the coming weeks and months.

²⁹ Given that this round of qualitative data revealed an urgent need for more data regarding mental health and psychosocial wellbeing, questions on this topic were added to the subsequent quantitative survey instrument. The study team worked with RPM country staff and consultants to ensure the sensitivity and rigor of these questions.



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FINDINGS

Drought Timeline

For many of those interviewed, the first failed rainy season during the last quarter of 2020 did not undermine their overall capacity to cope with shocks and stresses.³⁰ As many key informants highlighted, those that had engaged in preparatory or preventive strategies stood a better chance of coping with the first two failed seasons. Such strategies included building up and relying on grain reserves, increasing contributions to household savings, and improving access to water sources and investing in their infrastructure. Indeed, many households noted that they had the necessary grain stores, water sources, and/or livestock to cope with the challenges they faced during the initial months of the drought. However, its protracted nature combined with pre-existing stresses—such as road blockages, conflict-related insecurity, and the secondary impacts of Covid-19—quickly eroded the effectiveness of their coping strategies. By the third failed rainy season—October to December 2021—most had begun borrowing from local businesses, engaging in casual labor, turning to their social connections for support, and/or reducing food consumption.³¹ Those that were able migrated to urban centers and IDP camps where they could better access casual labor opportunities and humanitarian assistance. Key informants noted that households often migrated to nearby districts where they had social connections and were more likely to be able to get support from their networks.³² Some participants described waiting as long as possible before splitting their households or leaving their communities, stating that “it became harder to [cope] with the drought after our food was finished and we lost our animals. Then it forced us to leave our beloved location to areas where we hoped to get support. Now we are vulnerable with no support, and we are unable to cope with

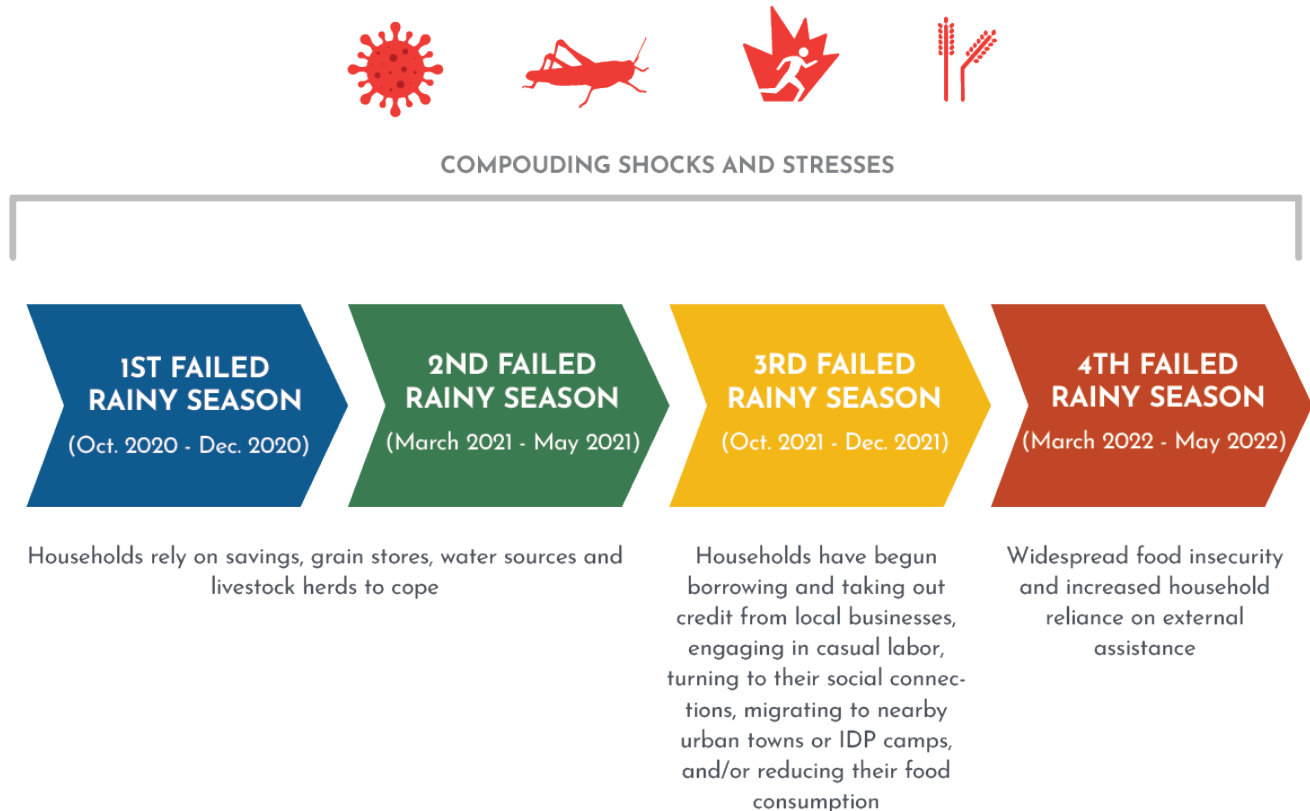
³⁰ There are two rainy seasons in Somalia: the gu, from March through May, and the deyr, from October through December.

³¹ Németh (2022).

³² Németh (2022); Households that were better off used public transport or donkey carts to migrate. Households that were financially worse off, however, often undertook the perilous journey on foot in extreme heat. Key informants noted that this resulted in numerous deaths, which mostly affected the most vulnerable members of a household—including children and the elderly.

the current drought.”³³ As the fourth failed rainy season has come and gone—March through May 2022—conditions have been characterized by widespread food insecurity and an increased reliance on external assistance for survival.³⁴

Figure 3: Timeline of drought & household coping strategies



Through 92 interviews, several crucial takeaways emerged during analysis. The following four subsections explore: 1) the compounded impacts of the 2021/22 drought; 2) the resilience capacities employed by positive deviant households and communities and the role they play in helping cope with the drought’s impacts; 3) the role of social connectedness when it comes to households’ resilience, and; 4) the psychosocial sources of resilience. The findings produced by this initial round of qualitative data collection demonstrate that while these resilience capacities are crucial in helping households survive, the protracted nature of the drought is exhausting these sources of resilience and the local systems that sustain them. Some of the strategies utilized by households and highlighted here provide crucial entry points for aid actors to leverage and strengthen these sources of resilience – both in response to the current drought, and to proactively reduce risks to future crises in Somalia.

The compounded impacts of the 2021/22 drought

Four consecutive seasons of below-average or failed rainy seasons have impacted almost all aspects of life across Somalia, especially agro-pastoral households in the Baidoa and Buurhakaba districts as well as displaced households in Baidoa town in the Bay region.³⁵ These failed rainy seasons have produced acute impacts on households’ livelihoods,³⁶ food security,³⁷ and health outcomes.³⁸ Interviews with key informants also highlighted early evidence of

³³ Male focus group participant, Dondardir IDP, July 2022.

³⁴ Németh (2022).

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ REACH (2022b).

³⁸ REACH (2022a).

the drought's downstream effects, including the rise in divorce, child marriage, and intimate partner violence.³⁹ In most cases, households have experienced total or near total loss of livestock herds, along with significant interruption to their agricultural activities. The impacts of nearly two years of below average rainfall have reverberated across key local systems—including local markets, environmental systems, and broader informal social protection structures—eroding their strength and durability. Reduced household purchasing power and increases in prices, drought-induced migration to camps and urban areas, and the increasing use of distress coping strategies have weakened many of these systems that would have otherwise helped buttress household resilience in the face of compounding shocks.

A GLOBAL CRISIS: ABDIRAHMAN'S STORY



In the wake of Covid-19, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and global uncertainty, food prices have skyrocketed worldwide as markets and supply chains reckon with rapidly evolving challenges. Abdirahman⁴⁰—who was born and raised in Ismodnoy, just several kilometers north of Baidoa—spoke of the increasing challenges his household was experiencing as a result of soaring prices. He notes that “life was simple before the drought, I had a granary full of grains in my farm for family use only. I never thought of food insecurity.” As the drought has continued, his livelihood has come to a halt as his farm—which was also his family's main source of food—has failed to produce a harvest after four failed rainy seasons. Now the price for a kilo of grains has more than doubled, rising from 7000 Somali Shillings (approx. 12 USD) to more than 18000 (nearly 32 USD). With the drought set to continue, Abdirahman described feeling “anxiety about securing basic needs for my family with no harvest on track.” With the global economy under increasing pressure,⁴¹ millions of Somali households like Abdirahman's will continue to grapple with rising food and cooking gas prices.

Food consumption has largely reduced across study sites, with households consuming an average of two meals per day; however, in more isolated districts like the agro-pastoral areas of Baidoa, households report eating one meal or less per day. The households that described more dire conditions—such as high rates of severe malnutrition among children and pregnant and lactating mothers—were often more geographically isolated, located further away from urban towns where resources and services are more readily available. At most sites where interviews were conducted, surrounding water sources have largely dried up, leaving many to rely on water trucking services provided by external actors. For some, the depletion of potable water sources drove them to leave their communities for IDP camps, breaking up communities and households and disrupting important informal support networks. Further, cramped conditions and poor infrastructure have led to the spread of water-borne and communicable diseases, aggravated malnutrition especially among children.

YASIR'S STORY⁴²



Like many in his community, Yasir's family has been practicing agro-pastoralism for generations. Animal herding, farming, and other agricultural work have long been his family's main source of income, sometimes supplemented by engaging in casual labor such as shoemaking and water collection. Having grown up in a family of 12, the cereals, sesame, beans, and other crops grown on his land have nourished his family and community for as long as he can remember. For him and many others in his community, harvesting crops and selling livestock products have been their primary source of income, keeping their households fed and running.

39 Németh (2022).

40 Name changed to maintain anonymity; In-depth interview with male agro-pastoralist, Ismodnoy, July 2022.

41 Stackpole (2022).

42 Names have been changed to maintain anonymity; In-depth interview with male agro-pastoralist, Tuboy, July 2022.

The drought, however, is testing the sustainability of his life's work. Successive seasons of poor or no rainfall have decimated his livestock herds, leaving the collection and sale of wood for fuel as one of his household's main sources of income. Every day his wife travels three to five km (about a three to five hour trip) to collect and carry back firewood that's then sold the next day in a nearby town, earning them about 5 to 10 USD. With more women engaging in this type of work, his wife is now traveling further and further out from the community to collect and sell firewood, even with the risks to her safety. This prolonged drought is starting to strain life in his community. As he describes it, "drought and conflict are major factors that are pushing pastoralists to drop out of the agro-pastoral livelihood system. Conflict in the area is caused by a combination of diminishing grazing areas and population growth (both human and animal), contributing to land degradation, competition for pasture and water, and inter- and intra-ethnic conflict." While these challenges pre-existed the drought, its protracted nature has magnified their impact.

Despite these challenges, Yasir considers himself to be managing the impacts of the drought well. Unlike others in his community, his household remains together and goat rearing and firewood collection provide his household with two—relatively stable—sources of income. He is still able to provide support to others in his community, sharing food, water, and other goods with his neighbors. He credits his planning and coping strategies as the main source of his psychosocial resilience, noting that because of them "I and my family are less worried [compared to others in the community] and are hoping for a better future."

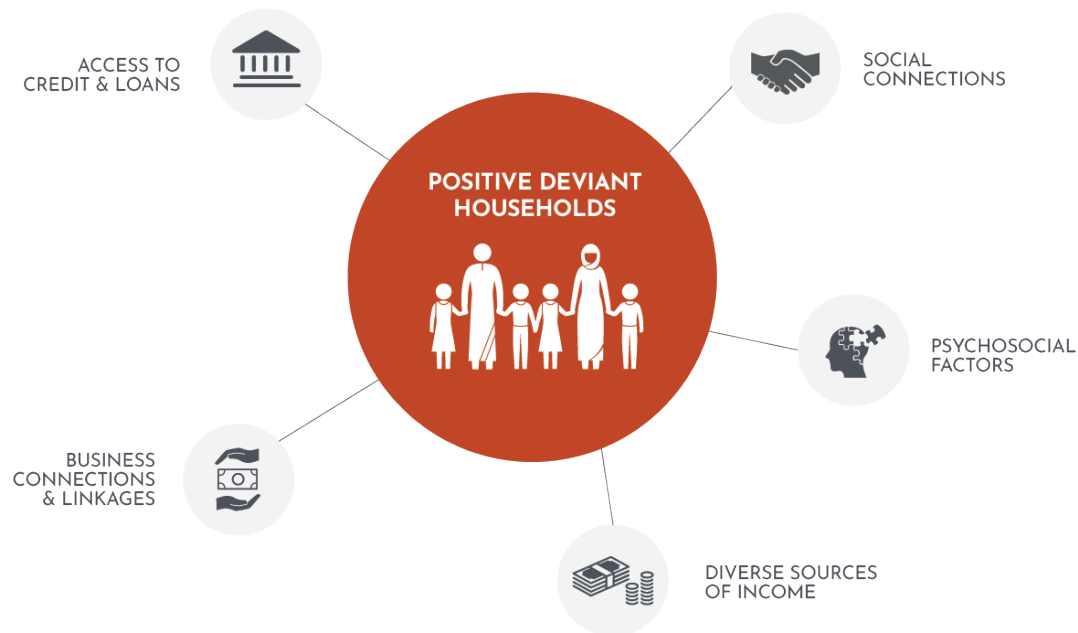
Resilience capacities employed by positive deviant households and communities

Qualitative interviews were conducted with positive deviant households to better understand the strategies and capacities they were utilizing that allowed them to fare better compared to others in their communities. In addition to faring better, these households often had, among other things, better food security outcomes and sustained sources of income. As one participant explained, "[Positive deviant households] have no worries about the current drought because of their long-lasting plan for maintaining their lives. They have different income generating activities like, poultry raising, small business, small vegetable gardens, money exchange and being part of community savings that



they put aside a small amount of each month.”⁴³ While PD households were equally as impacted by the severity of the drought, their effective use of their resilience capacities allowed them to withstand the impacts for much longer and continue to fare better than the average household. There were a number of factors that allowed these households to fare better, including access to loans and credit and having multiple sources of income.

Figure 4: Positive deviant resilience capacities



Access to loans and credit & cash assistance

Participants described access to loans and access credit as pivotal to their ability to survive, particularly between distribution periods of external assistance. In many cases, households borrowed goods from local businesses to secure necessities for their households, including basic foods such as sorghum, wheat, pasta, and rice. As one female FGD participant described it, “Borrowing is what we live for. We are full of debts. Especially during the current drought people mainly consume what they borrowed. It is a hard time for people to survive without borrowing.”⁴⁴ However, there are two factors that may be decisive when it comes to a household’s access to credit. First, participants noted that people who were more well-known or well-established in their community were more likely to receive credit versus those that were not. This may pose some challenges for recently displaced households who may not possess the same depth and/or breadth of connections in IDP camps or in the new towns or cities to which they’ve relocated. Evidence from other contexts has shown that people who are displaced in the aftermath of a shock are more likely to struggle to access goods on credit—a capacity vital to their survival and recovery—because they lack the necessary connections with local traders and enterprises.⁴⁵ Although most report that they try to relocate to camps or towns where they have pre-existing social connections, the rapid deterioration in humanitarian conditions and the urgent need to access life-saving external assistance in some cases means that households have at times prioritized migrating to camps or areas where they know aid actors are present and providing support. In some instances, this choice may come at the cost of relying on or remaining connected to their broader social networks. Second, participants explained that sometimes shopkeepers and local business owners were more likely to extend credit if they knew that a household had received or been selected to receive external assistance. Many emphasized that cash assistance was critical to their capacity to pay back debts to local businesses—and by extension, underwrite their perceived ‘creditworthiness’ when they attempt to borrow again in the future.

⁴³ Male casual laborer, KII with community leaders, Morshinile IDP camp, July 2022.

⁴⁴ Female small business owner, Female FGD in Hanano 2 IDP camp, July 2022

⁴⁵ Mercy Corps (2017).

Multiple diverse sources of income, including higher wage sources

Interviews with key informants and households also underscored the importance of having diverse sources of income—particularly among those who primarily engaged in agro-pastoral livelihoods and chose to engage in non-agricultural or livestock related livelihood activities. When possible, households reported seeking out casual labor opportunities, such as collecting and selling firewood, selling easy to harvest leafy vegetables, masonry, and more. Some participants noted an increase in both male and female heads of household engaging in casual labor. Women in particular were increasingly forced to engage in risky livelihood activities, such as traveling several kilometers from their homes to collect and sell firewood. Nearby natural resources have dwindled as drought-affected households have increasingly relied on them, forcing women to travel further and further from their communities, despite greater risks to their safety from conflict-related insecurity.

For agro-pastoral households located in more remote areas, proximity to nearby towns and villages where they could access markets and seek out casual labor opportunities was a determining factor in their ability to generate additional income. While it may not be enough to make up for income lost as a result of the drought or pay off debts, this income did help households meet some needs and access some basic necessities. Among those living in IDP camps, casual labor was often the only source of income for some households, but participants noted that even these opportunities were no longer paying as well as they did before the drought. This is likely due to the secondary impacts of Covid-19 on local markets and economies, as well as the skyrocketing prices of basic necessities as a result of widespread economic shocks following the global pandemic and outbreak of war in Ukraine. Despite the wide ranging challenges facing households, a local key informant explained that these additional sources of income were especially helpful during the early phases of the drought, “The other [capacity] that helped households cope during the first and second phase [of the drought] was unskilled labor, such as the collection of firewood and washing clothes for families that are better off. Through that they were able to make ends meet.”⁴⁶

Others noted that those who were able to engage in more skilled activities, such as teaching, tailoring, and construction, fared even better thanks to the higher demand for and higher wages provided by these opportunities. Because skilled opportunities were considered less vulnerable to the impacts of shocks, many participants emphasized the importance of investing in vocational training that would allow them to continue building upon these skills. However, for many of those interviewed in agro-pastoral areas, households did not want to completely drop out of their livelihoods in favor of skilled labor opportunities. All had been engaging in agro-pastoral activities for generations, and further underscored the need to ensure that their livelihoods were more sustainable and climate-resilient—especially as the likelihood of more widespread climate shocks has increased. Research from other contexts, especially within the horn of Africa, demonstrates effective approaches to preserving agro-pastoral livelihoods during crises. These include working with pastoralists to find ways their livestock can be used as collateral to meet short-term cash needs, providing credit to animal health service and livestock feed providers to extend their services closer to one another, and encouraging the production of fodder crops in riverine areas to help reduce drought-related mortalities.⁴⁷ Some programs in Somalia found that programs with Community-based Animal Health Workers (CAHW) had good outcomes, particularly when livestock herders trusted and felt that these providers were accessible at the village level.⁴⁸ Among the needs outlined by participants, improving water infrastructure, distributing drought-resilient crop seedlings, restocking efforts, and increasing access to animal health services all emerged as opportunities for strengthening agro-pastoral livelihoods.

Business connections and linkages

For those households with the means or savings, small side businesses were highlighted as an important source of additional income—particularly among women and those living in IDP camps. Small business owners leveraged their social connections to businesses and wholesalers in nearby towns and urban areas to access goods on credit, which they then repaid using the profits from their businesses or cash assistance. Interviews with those living in the Morshinile and Dondardiri camps revealed that households that had established small businesses perceived themselves to be faring better and/or more resilient compared to others in their community. Some participants indicated that the decision to establish a small business was an intentional one, based on their previous experiences with the 2016/17 drought. They noted that those who had small businesses, particularly in IDP camps, were faring better in the aftermath and recognized that these businesses were more sustainable in comparison to their previous, shock-sensitive agro-pastoral

⁴⁶ Male casual laborer, KII with community leaders in Dondardir IDP camp, July 2022.

⁴⁷ Akilu et al. (2013).

⁴⁸ Wiggins et al. (2021).

livelihoods. As part of their livelihood diversification activities, these households were often thinking of new ways to scale up and sustain their businesses in the face of future shocks. Moreover, they had frequently participated in savings groups and VSLA programs, through which they were able to develop small nest eggs that later became crucial to supporting their livelihood activities during the drought.

Recommendations:

Conversations with global and local aid actors, community leaders, and participants emphasized the need for a combination of both short-term strategies that address the immediate impacts of the drought, as well as long-term programming that is concerned with strengthening household resilience. These include activities that support and strengthen households' capacity to adapt their livelihoods, ensuring that these interventions can be refined to meet shock-affected communities' needs.

- 1. Invest in vocational training, VSLAs and savings groups, and other long-term resilience-focused activities. In particular, resilience activities must support households' capacity to diversify their livelihoods in the face of emergent shocks and protracted crises.** Many recognized that the protracted nature of the drought and the worsening impacts of climate change put the sustainability of their livelihoods into question. Among positive deviant households, one of most critical capacities for resilience was the capacity to diversify their livelihoods, particularly among those whose primary source of income was agro-pastoral activities. During the early stages of the drought, households were able to seek out casual labor opportunities that allowed them to make up for lost income and resources. These opportunities were often low skilled, risky, and paid lower wages but were easy to seek out at local markets in nearby towns. However, as drought conditions have worsened, the capacity for these labor opportunities to buttress households' resilience and help them cope has dwindled. Most interviews highlighted the need for interventions that supported households' capacity to diversify their livelihood activities given the growing number of covariate climate shocks, while also addressing systems-level challenges related to shared resources, access to markets, and agricultural value chains. Participants pointed to savings groups and VSLA as an important resource, through which they were able to amass enough assets to establish additional livelihood activities such as small businesses. Looking forward, participants also call for the provision of more drought-resistant crops and training in new climate-smart agriculture practices and technologies.
- 2. Monitor household debt cycles and patterns to ensure the effectiveness of cash and cash plus activities, and to take advantage of opportunities to bolster local markets.** Access to credit has been critical to households' capacity to survive and access basic resources during the drought, with external assistance often used to not only repay debts in a timely manner but establish creditworthiness among local businesses. With the compounding impacts of the drought and ongoing food price crisis, aid actors should pay attention to how debt and credit contribute to household resilience and the resilience of local markets, as well as their potential impacts on the effectiveness of aid activities. Evidence from other contexts found that households were often caught in some form of food-related debt and, when it came to using external assistance, households often prioritized repayment over meeting household needs.⁴⁹ By prioritizing repayment, they were able to abide by reciprocity norms and better ensure future access to loans and credit from their social connections. By not accounting for the importance debt repayment plays in household spending in their program design, aid actors failed to achieve the outcomes they set out to attain (in this case, increased dietary diversity).⁵⁰ Moreover, debt repayment can help ensure that small shops and local businesses continue to function during crises, thereby maintaining their role in supporting household food needs and supporting local economies. By monitoring debt cycles as part of their programmatic activities, aid actors may better understand how the combination of their assistance's timing and frequency and reciprocity demands may diminish their impact in the immediate term, as well as how it may help households secure future reciprocal support. Monitoring household debt cycles and repayment patterns alongside routine market monitoring, including among local traders and vendors, may also enable aid actors to identify opportunities to further reinforce local markets through intentional assistance to small businesses. As a result, aid actors may be better able to time activities and allocate assistance amounts (particularly cash assistance) to ensure they achieve programmatic outcomes.

49 ACAPS (2022).

50 Ibid.

The role of social connectedness

In Somalia, social connections have been a long-established source of resilience, helping households access what they need to survive during previous droughts and crises.⁵¹ They have continued to play a crucial role during the current drought. Households have provided one another a range of support, from the tangible to the intangible, including cash, food, information, and emotional support. As one participant described it, “there is no one who can survive without sharing. The more you share, the more help you get.”⁵² Participants underscored that the more connected a household was, the easier it was for them to access support from their social networks. In some instances, those that had connections in urban centers and the larger diaspora were able to receive intermittent support that helped them cover household bills, school fees, pay back debts, and/or purchase basic necessities. Given the differences in predominant livelihoods in rural versus urban towns, these households are likely experiencing the crisis in different ways, which may better enable urban households to send support to their rural connections. Previous research on social connections in Somalia found that those who experienced similar shocks (e.g. households that were both engaged in agro-pastoralism) were more likely to deplete their ability to rely on their social connections.⁵³ Those who had more diverse connections and experienced the shock differently were able to rely on their connections for longer periods of time.⁵⁴ Future rounds of data collection will look to unpack and better understand the support and reciprocity practices between rural and urban social connections, as well as opportunities to leverage these connections to access hard-to-reach areas.

Although the types of connections households possessed varied, some participants noted that those with more social connections—and who, by extension, had better access to resources—often shared with less well-connected households. These connections preexisted the drought, with households leveraging them to “help less privileged members in the community by giving them zakat⁵⁵ and sharing food between households during the first season of the drought.”⁵⁶ This even extended to external assistance, with some households sharing willingly and local leaders creating community pots into which households deposited portions of the assistance they received. Community leaders reported that this practice of paying into a shared pot of money was particularly useful in mitigating tensions between households that received assistance and those that did not, as well as ensuring that vulnerable households did not fall through the cracks as a result of the targeting process. Vulnerable community members included elderly and/or disabled individuals who could no longer engage in livelihood activities, orphans, and widows. One community key informant described this process within his camp, “Our camp leader visits each household every 24 hours to assess their living situation, and he sometimes finds households who haven’t cooked food for a day and don’t have something to eat at all. Then the camp leader will swiftly gather some rice, sugar, maize, and milk and deliver them to the families in need.”⁵⁷ Given widespread and substantial levels of need, these informal support networks and the (re)distribution of resources within them ensure that the most vulnerable—and often more socially isolated—households are able to survive.

Despite strong intra-communal connections, engagement with and connections to local authorities, business groups, local and diaspora associations, NGOs, and other formal sources of assistance remains much weaker—particularly in hard-to-reach areas. Some households and community leaders described similar conditions, with local informal actors attempting to reach out to organizations to advocate for and secure assistance for their communities but finding little success. While many of these local actors have been active in the drought response, the lack of proper documentation, the ad hoc nature of these initiatives, and opaque targeting criteria have given rise to an, at times, chaotic response. This was found to be particularly true among private sector actors, who, as some Somalia-based key informants described, often distributed assistance on the basis of kinship rather than vulnerability. As previous research has demonstrated, these networks of support can be as exclusive as they are inclusive, prioritizing the distribution of support on the basis of clan, tribal and/or political affiliations, among other factors.⁵⁸ Such dynamics can ultimately magnify vulnerability and need if not mitigated or addressed.

51 For more on the role of social connections during previous droughts in Somalia, see [Maxwell et al. \(2016\)](#) and [Lwanga-Ntale & Owino \(2020\)](#).

52 Male agropastoralist and casual laborer, Male FGD in Madaxwarabe, July 2022.

53 Majid et al. (2016).

54 Ibid.

55 Zakat refers to the “mandatory yearly donation of 2.5% of one’s net wealth” that is required by all practicing Muslim adults. In many instances, it is redistributed among communities and by the diaspora in support of the poorest households (See [Akhtar 2021](#)). The global value of zakat donations is estimated to be between 200 billion to 1 trillion usd per annum (See [Ismail 2018](#)).

56 Male casual laborer, KII with community leaders, Dondardir IDP camp, July 2022.

57 Female FGD participant, Morishinle IDP camp, July 2022.

58 Kim et al. (2022); Kim et al. (2020); Maxwell et al. (2016).

Although sharing continues, these networks of support have become increasingly exhausted as households' capacity to share has declined. One community member in Raydabale described the extent of the drought's impact, "I have a good relationship with the community, but no one can support me. [Everyone in the community] is now on the same level economically."⁵⁹ Diminished sharing capacities among households—even positive deviant ones—in communities where informal support networks are a critical source of resilience is emblematic of the dire conditions that many are contending with. Some participants also reported spikes in household and/or community tensions, signaling their increasing struggle to manage and mitigate the impacts of the drought. Key informants echoed these concerns, noting tensions were on the rise as a result of conflict over shared resources, particularly pasture and water. As the drought continues without reprieve in sight, the growing number of challenges to households' social connections signals their exhaustion and an urgent need for aid actors to bolster household resilience by working through and strengthening these informal support networks.

Recommendations:

1. **Monitor and improve targeting approaches to help minimize social exclusion and mitigate increasing tensions.** Given the critical role that informal and local groups, including private sector actors and diaspora groups, have played in the humanitarian response, local and external actors must effectively partner and coordinate with one another to ensure that their efforts do not overlap and undermine one another. Community leaders have demonstrated that they have developed effective mechanisms to mitigate tensions over assistance and ensure that vulnerable households are not excluded or forgotten during the distribution process. Aid actors can complement these efforts by working with community leaders to develop people-centered communication strategies that help with the dissemination of timely and accurate information among households, particularly during the early design and implementation phases of activities.
2. **Strengthen informal support networks by partnering and working with local community actors, who are deeply embedded in their communities and pre-positioned to reach vulnerable households.** Given the global food crisis and the reverberating impacts of Covid-19, aid actors must contend with a widespread crisis with limited resources. Local leaders and community actors are a critical source of knowledge and access, often organizing and leveraging their own informal support networks to meet their communities needs, making them vital partners in aid actors' efforts. Aid actors can work with community partners to monitor the strength of informal support networks, remain vigilant for signs of exhaustion, and identify key entry points to provide support, such as supporting local savings groups or VSLAs.



Ezra Millstein/Mercy Corps 2022.

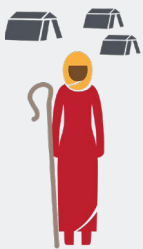
⁵⁹ In-depth interview with male agro-pastoralist, Raydabale, July 2022.

Mental and psychosocial well-being and the role of psychosocial support in household resilience

The protracted nature of the drought combined with several decades of compounding shocks have had significant implications for the psychosocial wellbeing of households. Some estimates suggest that as many as one in three Somalis are struggling with some form of mental illness, with only three psychiatrists serving a population of nearly 16 million.⁶⁰ Key informants described increasing levels of sadness, depression, disturbed sleep or lack of sleep, and anxiety and worry about the future among individuals. One MHPSS provider described the far-reaching impacts of the drought on people's well-being, "Food, cash, water and shelter are crucial for survival but they are not enough. Some of the drought-hit communities lost all their livestock or sometimes even their household members and [as a result] suffer from great levels of trauma."⁶¹

Early research, however, suggests strong links between key psychosocial factors and resilience, including self-efficacy, optimism, confidence to adapt, supportive social norms, and aspiration.⁶² However, the literature on psychosocial factors remains nascent as resilience research has often overlooked the role they may play in helping individuals cope, thrive, and adapt.⁶³ Indeed, some research suggests that failure to account for psychosocial factors in resilience programming may end up blunting the impact for program participants and undermine investments.⁶⁴ While many of the psychosocial factors that research has focused on are largely externally defined, they nonetheless provide a promising opportunity to develop more holistic activities that address both the objective and subjective factors that contribute to resilience.

AISHA'S STORY⁶⁵



Since leaving her village for the Dondardir camp, Aisha and her husband have had to start again. Although she grew up in a large family with 10 siblings, she described her childhood as ideal and stable, with large-scale shocks and stresses few and far between. Growing up, her family's land provided them with all they needed, during both periods of plenty and constraint. As the drought has continued, however, Aisha and her family have had to pivot their livelihoods and find new sources of income. Together, using their savings from their livestock and agricultural activities, they sat down to brainstorm small business ideas to help ease the strain on the household. Diversifying their income sources, she says, now helps to sustain them.

While Aisha notes that her circumstances are relatively better compared to others in her community, her household has not managed to escape fully unscathed. Dwindling clean water sources means that the spread of water-borne diseases have risen, impacting members of her household and others in the camp. Where previously they were easily able to settle their health-related debts, increasing prices and decreasing income means that securing food is more important than addressing health issues—which she worries will be a potential source of future complications. And as every household struggles to cope with the drought, support from social connections—a critical source of resilience during past shocks—has decreased as households struggle to meet their basic needs. As Aisha describes it, "family relations that were built on love and friendship have faded away since the drought. Families used to share and help each other with what they had...since then, life has become more difficult to manage and most have lost their sources of income due to drought. Families have nothing to share among themselves leading to poor family relations." For many, these connections, which had long been a lifeline during periods of resource scarcity, are now reaching exhaustion.

60 Mumin & Rhodes (2019).

61 KII with MHPSS provider, Baidoa, May 2022.

62 Béné et al. (2019); Béné et al. (2016); USAID (2018); Collins, Matthews, & Gottschalk (2022); Frankenberger (2017).

63 Cabot Venton, Prillaman & Kim (2021).

64 Ibid.

65 Name changed to maintain anonymity. In-depth interview with female casual laborer, Dondardir IDP camp, July 2022.

Although the drought has taken its toll, Aisha remains optimistic. Her family, she says, is more ready and prepared to cope with any shock that comes their way. They will continue to diversify their income sources, a strategy that she says has helped some in her community remain more resilient than those with only one income. Most notably, she attributes her resilience to her outlook, underscoring that “without a positive mindset, no individual or human being can stand strong.”

Participants described increases in stress, anguish, and isolation, with their struggle and/or inability to provide for their children and household contributing to a heightened sense of guilt and anxiety. However, they also highlighted a number of psychosocial capacities that helped them cope, underscoring the importance of optimism, commitment to hard work (e.g. a sense of self-efficacy and future-oriented thinking), social connections, and seeking comfort in religion and spirituality. Participants repeatedly emphasized the importance of optimism, particularly when combined with strong religious beliefs that help them understand their current circumstances. One participant from the Morshinile IDP camp described the strength he derived from these qualities, “through our strong beliefs the household has managed to remain strong and energetic.”⁶⁶ Through these capacities, households described developing a sense of purpose and engaged in meaning making during difficult circumstances, which helped reinforce the role of community and social connections as well as their internal locus of control.

Social connections in particular proved to be an important source of emotional support and resilience, with participants describing a strong sense of solidarity within their community that extended beyond exchanging tangible support.⁶⁷ A casual laborer residing in an IDP camp described the ways in which community members encouraged one another in their early business ventures, “It helps a lot that we care for each other. For example, when one of us begins a small business, we all buy from him/her in the camp to help motivate him/her.”⁶⁸ This sense of solidarity was especially prevalent in agro-pastoral sites where households were linked by their livelihood activities and among those who had been living in IDP camps for some time and had developed strong networks. Moreover, local leaders and some households noted that religious and community leaders were frequently a crucial source of guidance and support—particularly among men. Their prominent roles in their communities often means they have firsthand knowledge of each household’s circumstances, providing insight into community members’ economic and psychosocial wellbeing. A focus group participant recounted the critical support that a local leader provided, “At a time when I lacked food for my kids and lost half of my livestock and farm, I nearly went crazy because I was thinking non-stop everyday. I stopped communicating with others and remained home alone. That is when the village sheikh and friends began coming to my house regularly, encouraging me to stay strong and providing me with some of the resources...From then on, it is hard for me to have a broken heart.” Their in-depth knowledge of their communities and capacity to mobilize resources and support often means that these community leaders can be decisive when it comes to a households’ ability to cope

Recommendations:

- 1. Invest in and develop locally-relevant MHPSS interventions that are focused on reinforcing key sources of support within communities, such as local and religious leaders.** The compounding crises and several decades of conflict and insecurity have taken a toll on households’ psychosocial wellbeing. Given the acute nature of the current crisis, aid actors should identify and partner with key sources of psychosocial support within communities. This can include partnering with local and religious leaders and community health workers to invest and train them in psychological first aid, an evidence-based approach “designed to reduce the initial distress caused by traumatic events and to foster short- and long-term adaptive functioning and coping.”⁶⁹ Aid actors can work with local partners to adapt and refine such approaches to ensure that they are contextually relevant to the needs of communities, as well as disentangle the stigma surrounding mental health and illness.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ There are a number of factors that inhibit our ability to parse out differences in PSS factors based on gender, location, etc. Given the sensitivities associated with discussing psychosocial wellbeing and mental health, discussions on these topics were limited to key informant interviews conducted with global and local aid actors and community leaders who could provide a wide ranging overview regarding households’ conditions within their communities. Further rounds of qualitative data collection will look to shed light on the differences in emotional support and psychosocial wellbeing between different groups among our study participants.

⁶⁸ Male FGD participant, Morshinile IDP camp, July 2022.

⁶⁹ National Child Traumatic Stress Network (n.d.).

2. **Design resilience activities to include components that bolster the psychosocial factors contributing to resilience, including informal support networks and social connectedness.** Research has underscored the role that social networks play supporting households' and individuals' psychosocial wellbeing. Activities that establish and support group-based forums, such as self-help groups or VSLAs, provide an entry point and avenue for aid actors to maximize on the psychosocial benefits they provide. Such activities can be complemented by community engagement projects that strengthen neighborhood interest groups, traditional group gatherings, or other women or youth-led groups that facilitate connections among community members.

Implications for future rounds of RPM data collection

As the RPM project continues, there remain ample opportunities for the project to generate deeper insights. In particular, subsequent rounds of data collection should continue teasing out the nuances surrounding social connectedness and the psychosocial factors of resilience. Along with this initial round of data collection, previous research conducted by RPM—and beyond—have underscored their crucial contribution to resilience, yet research has only just begun to understand how key stakeholders can effectively design and implement activities that bolster them.

The role of social connectedness

Future rounds of qualitative research should continue to unpack the dynamics surrounding social connectedness and informal support networks. Key informants and interview participants referenced the rise in tensions at the household and community levels; however, further probing could help RPM better understand if the ways in which community leaders are addressing these challenges are effective in the long-term when it comes to addressing the underlying drivers of tension. Moreover, much of the discussion concerning social connectedness has focused on its tangible benefits, including economic security, food security, and access to information. Further research is needed to help understand the intangible—aka the psychosocial—benefits that these connections yield. Thus far, the research has treated it as an added benefit to engaging with and leveraging one's social connections and not necessarily a key source of resilience in and of itself. A more nuanced understanding of these dynamics may help practitioners better understand when, how, and whom households turn to for support, as well as when they do not. Finally, participants often referenced remaining in touch with connections in urban centers and in the larger diaspora, relying on them for remittances as well as information. Additional rounds of data collection should look to understand how households are remaining connected—e.g. mobile phones, social media—particularly when households are split or have migrated to IDP camps. Through this line of inquiry, RPM may have a better understanding of the geographic reach of these connections and how they can enable aid actors to access hard-to-reach areas, which are more at risk for experiencing IPC 4 (Emergency) or 5 (Catastrophe/Famine) level food insecurity.⁷⁰ Such insights may prove useful to program designers and implementers who seek to work through and strengthen informal support networks.

Psychosocial Factors

One of the long-running critiques regarding the framing and understanding of psychosocial factors is that they are largely externally defined, relying on concepts and capacities that may not be applicable across all contexts. As such, current research approaches can overestimate some factors and fail to account for others. In this context, not nearly enough attention has been granted to understanding links between spirituality and religion and its contributions to individuals' psychosocial well-being. Participants continuously stressed the importance and the meaningful role that religion played in their ability to manage the psychological stress of the drought, as well as the sense of community and connection it helped foster. Future rounds of data collection should consider unpacking the specific psychosocial factors that religion and spirituality cultivate within households and communities and possible linkages to resilience. This may also lead to a shift in our broader understanding of the links between psychosocial wellbeing and resilience, encouraging practitioners to apply a more relational rather than individual lens when designing and implementing programming. As these initial rounds of data collection and analysis and research from elsewhere have demonstrated, individual and household resilience is inextricably linked with the resilience of the broader community and informal support networks.

⁷⁰ FEWS NET & FSNAU (2022).

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